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18

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Combating terrorism

US at work to make its embassies more secure

Report urges relocation of US posts, use of new technology

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IT'S called the "15-minute door."

According to the United States State Department, it can survive 50 whacks with a sledgehammer, five shots from a high-power rifle, and prolonged clawing and picking with crowbars and axes. The purpose: to provide US embassy employees besieged by an angry mob enough time to find safe haven inside the embassy and to burn sensitive files.

The "15-minute door" is just one example of a proliferating technology designed to counteract the threat of terrorism that has made the job of being a US diplomat overseas one of the most dangerous in the world.

In a report issued yesterday, a blue-ribbon panel appointed by Secretary of State George P. Shultz says the State Department needs to buy more "15-minute doors" and make more sweeping changes to make US diplomatic posts around the world more secure.

The report of the Advisory Panel on Overseas Security, chaired by former CIA Deputy Director Bobby R. Inman, calls for the relocation of a large number of US diplomatic facilities abroad to more secure locations. It also calls for retrofitting other facilities with devices designed to reduce their vulnerability to terrorist attacks.

In addition, the report recommends that the State Department's various security-related activities be consolidated into a new Bureau for Diplomatic Security, to be set up in the department's main foreign policy office. The bureau would be placed under an assistant secretary of state for diplomatic security.

Attacks against US have risen steadily in past 20 years

According to the State Department, the report of the advisory panel covers a problem that scarcely existed two decades ago. Before the mid-1960s, not a single US diplomat was murdered abroad for political reasons. Since then, more than 70 have been killed and many others wounded as a result of terrorist actions.

The problem started when small groups of terrorists began kidnapping individual diplomats. In the 1970s, terrorism escalated into the kind of mob violence that led, in 1979, to the capture of 52 US diplomats in Iran. Today, the main threat is massive attacks, like the car bombings that destroyed or heavily damaged US embassies in Kuwait in 1983 and Beirut in 1984.

"We see terrorist groups learning that our embassies can get them a great deal of publicity," says Assistant Secretary of State Robert E. Lamm. "If [terrorists] can perpetrate an action against one of our facilities, or individual diplomats, they can draw attention to their particular cause."

For the most part, the report says, the available remedies are essentially preventive in nature.

One is greater international cooperation to deal with states that support or sponsor terrorists.

Another is a greater accent on intelligence gathering to track the activities of terrorist groups before they strike.

A third is to upgrade training programs for embassy staff and families on how to recognize and deal with terrorism. Courses now given by the State Department include instruction on how to drive defensively to avoid kidnapping and how to cope with being held hostage.

But the main line of defense is the physical security of the 262 embassies and consulates maintained by the US around the world.

Gone are the days of open, airy, centrally located US embassies built to welcome foreign nationals, the report says.

As the report's recommendations are acted on, US embassies will be increasingly transformed into fortified bunkers with tank traps, shatterproof glass, and bomb deflectors.

Right now, in Jakarta, a mechanical drawbridge separates the embassy from the outside world. In San Salvador, a huge screen deflects rockets before they reach the embassy compound. In Beirut, a fleet of 23 armored vehicles shuttles the US embassy staff to and from work.

In all, the State Department will spend nearly \$500 million this year on measures to upgrade the security of US diplomatic posts abroad.

'Open doors' of US embassies are closing for self-protection

Even so, there is only so much that can be done. Department officials say facing the future means bracing against more powerful weapons, including "standoff" rockets, mortars, and possibly even air attacks. Protecting against these threats will require more reliance on the capabilities of the host governments, State Department officials say.

Moreover, even if US embassies are secured, American officials acknowledge that "soft" targets, like US businesses and the residences of US citizens abroad, could become more frequent targets for terrorists in the future.

Surprisingly, State Department officials say the growing threat to US diplomatic personnel abroad has not affected

2

recruitment. Last year, more than 28,000 people — the highest number ever — applied for the department's 250 available Foreign Service jobs. Nor has there been any shortage of State Department employees willing to serve in high-risk areas abroad.

But security threats have altered, perhaps permanently, the kind of open image US embassies have tried to cultivate in the past. Historically, libraries and exhibits have been used to attract foreign nationals into US embassies.

"That kind of casual contact is now substantially reduced," Mr. Lamm says.

Embassy capacity is impaired

Such threats have also impeded the job of embassy officials, who need to maintain close personal contacts if they are to have a finger on the political pulse of a host country.

Barricades, guards, and high walls create "psychological barriers to intercourse with the local population," which forces "US officials to rely more on secondhand information," says U. Alexis Johnson, a former ambassador and undersecretary of state.

The unavoidable accent on security "inhibits the capacity of the embassy to judge the local situation, and that's a serious handicap to diplomacy," adds David D. Newsom, a former career diplomat, now associate dean of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.